

Pungent Memories from Mr. Acheson

Kenneth Harris is a British journalist who was stationed in Washington during the early 1950s. He recently interviewed 78-year-old former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson for BBC television, and the following conversation is drawn from that interview.

Dean Acheson's appointment as Secretary of State was one of the first things Harry Truman did when he was elected President of the United States in 1948. The Korean War began in June 1950. It went badly for General MacArthur, the American commander of the United Nations forces. Later, there was talk of withdrawal and of using the atomic bomb. The British prime minister, Clement Attlee, flew to meet the President in Washington. I asked Mr. Acheson how deep was the distrust which the British government seemed to have of the Americans at this time.

I think it was not distrust on the part of the British: it was alarm. Mr. Attlee did quite right to do this. But the President made a great flub in a press conference. The press led Mr. Truman on. They said: who decides what weapons are to be used in fighting in Korea? And Mr. Truman quite naturally said: why, the commanding general. Was this true of air, ground, navy? Surely—it's true of everything. Would this be true of the atomic bomb? Mr. Truman unhappily said yes. Well, the answer was no. The law said that only the President could authorize the use of this weapon. So after this thing was over, we all rushed around like chickens without heads and we put out a clarification. The clarification said, unhappily the President made a mistake or misunderstood the question, because it isn't up to the general, it's up to *him* to decide it. Before the clarification caught up with the rest of the news conference, there was a hot debate going on in the House of Commons. It was a terrible thing that General MacArthur was going to decide whether the atomic bomb would be used in Korea, and Mr. Attlee said: I will fly to the United States this afternoon and take this up with the President. By that time we'd said this wasn't the case, but Mr. Attlee was up to his ears in flight and he had to come. He arrived here: they were to meet at 10:30 the next morning to discuss this. I was early at the department and Bob Lovett called me from the Pentagon and said: "When I finish talking with you, you cannot reach me again. All incoming calls

STATINTL

BY STEWART ALSOP



'BREACH OF SECURITY'

WASHINGTON — It is interesting — and rather wryly amusing — to juxtapose a couple of editorials that have appeared in The New York Times. One appeared on June 16 after a Federal judge ordered the Times to suspend publication of the top-secret Pentagon studies of the U.S. role in Vietnam.

The Times called this "an unprecedented example of censorship," which indeed it is. But then, the verbatim publication of great masses of top-secret papers is also unprecedented.

"What was the reason that impelled The Times to publish this material in the first place?" the Times asks rhetorically. "The basic reason is, as was stated in our original reply to Mr. Mitchell, that we believe 'that it is in the interest of the people of this country to be informed'..." The editorial continues on that lofty note: "We publish the documents and related running account not to prove any debater's point... but to present to the American public a history — admittedly incomplete — of decision-making at the highest levels of government..."

The other editorial, which was even more righteously outraged, appeared in the Times some years ago. It was entitled "Breach of Security," and it denounced an article "purporting to tell what went on in the executive committee of the National Security Council... The secrecy of one of the highest organs of the United States has been seriously breached."

'MC CARTHY TECHNIQUE'

"What kind of advice can the President expect to get under such circumstances?" the Times asked, again rhetorically. "How can there be any real freedom of discussion or of dissent; how can anyone be expected to advance positions that may be politically unpopular or unprofitable? Does no one in Washington recall the McCarthy era and the McCarthy technique?... The various positions of the members of the NSC taken during deliberation must remain secret... The integrity of the National Security Council, and of the advice received by the President, is at stake."

The article that inspired the Times to this burst of righteous indignation was a Saturday Evening Post piece on the Cuban missile crisis by Charles Bartlett and this writer. It too was an attempt "to present to the American public a history — admittedly incomplete —

— of decision-making at the highest levels of government." Although the Times, fortunately, could not know it at the time, the article had been read in advance (and rather badly edited) by no less an authority on national security than the President of the United States. It contained no word from any NSC paper, or from any other secret document.

REASONS—AND REASONS

The writers' reasons for writing the article were perhaps less lofty than those claimed by the Times in its recent editorial. They included a desire to do a good reportorial job (the account was later confirmed in detail in Robert Kennedy's book on the Cuban crisis). They even included a desire to make a bit of money. But like most reporters, we also believed that "it is in the interest of the people of this country to be informed..."

No doubt a desire to inform the people was a major reason for the Times's decision to publish the secret papers. But (to adopt the Times's own rhetorical style) might there not have been other reasons too? Does it not matter a great deal to the Times who does the informing? Is it not the Times's criterion that if the Times does the informing, that is in the national interest, and if somebody else does it, that is "a breach of security"?

And is the Times really indifferent to whether or not the information, which it is "in the interest of the people of this country" to publish, supports the views of the Times? The article that so enraged the Times pictured the late Adlai Stevenson, then a major Times icon, in a somewhat dubious light, and that perhaps had something to do with the rage. The Times has long passionately supported the cause that the leaking of the Pentagon papers was obviously intended to serve.

The purloined papers printed by the Times were first offered to Sen. George McGovern and Rep. Paul McCloskey, the leading doves in the Senate and House. Obviously, the purpose of the leak was to prove that this country became involved in Vietnam by a process of stealthy deception; and that therefore the United States should withdraw forthwith, leaving the South Vietnamese to their fate.

...prove what they are intended to

prove. Allowing for the need for contingency planning, and allowing also for Lyndon Johnson's well-known passion for concealment, there is less deception of the public in the documents than self-deception.

There is the ancient American illusion that wars can be won cleanly in the air, rather than bloodily on the ground, of course. But the basic self-deception was the illusion that, if the United States could only find the right combination of sticks and carrots, the Vietnamese Communists would (in Robert McNamara's phrase) "move to a settlement by negotiation." The unswerving goal of the Communists, then and now, was and is the imposition of Communist rule on all former French Indochina. There is no stick short of "bombing them back to the stone age," and no carrot short of turning Saigon over to their tender mercies, that will divert them from that goal.

No American President who was also an honorable and humane man could hit them with that stick, or offer them that carrot. Yet the illusion that the North Vietnamese are capable of "reasonable" compromise is amazingly persistent, especially among liberal Democrats — its most recent manifestation is the "Clifford Plan," strongly supported by the Times.

NONSENSE

Despite its ineffable self-righteousness, the Times is certainly a great paper, though not as great as when it had the Herald Tribune to worry about. Moreover, anyone who has been around Washington for some time knows that a lot of governmental nonsense has been perpetrated in the name of "security." Most reasonably diligent reporters, including this one, have been investigated by the government for publishing information the government found it inconvenient to have published.

Yet surely there is a problem of security worth worrying about when "the various positions of the members of the NSC," as well as National Intelligence Estimates and secret coded messages from foreign governments, are reproduced verbatim in great quantities. Indeed, the Times series, by the Times's own standards, is the most serious "breach of security" in modern history. Yet those who wait for the government to discontinue this particular breach will have a long wait.